

A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



CRAIG BIRHLE

Muskrat

Winter Under Ice

Busy as a beaver, but not closely related, throughout summer and fall, the life of the muskrat on the Northern Plains slows as wetlands and waterways inhabited by this semi-aquatic animal freeze.

Preparations for winter began sometime in late summer and picked up in September with the arrival of cooler temperatures and fewer daylight hours. With the coming of North Dakota's leanest season imminent, the muskrat's to-do list included building and reinforcing lodges and storing food for winter.

Muskrats live in self-constructed burrows dug with sharp front claws into stream banks, and in houses, or lodges, made of vegetation. Burrows and lodges – some muskrats have both – have underwater entrances with dry living areas above water.

Muskrat lodges are as recognizable as the giant Canada geese and other waterfowl that often nest atop the structures that stick 3-4 feet

above the water's surface. Constructed of rushes, grasses and whatever else is available, some lodges measure upward of 8 feet at the base.

Lodges provide muskrats protection from both predators and the weather. During winter, muskrats are relatively inactive, spending most of their time sleeping and feeding. Like everyone else – human or not – muskrats are patiently waiting for spring's arrival and the snow and ice to vanish.

The state's muskrat population fluctuates tremendously, depending mostly on water conditions. After last winter's abundance of snow, followed by a wet spring and cool summer, many wetlands left high and dry for some years are full again, setting the stage for a muskrat revival in North Dakota.

The average home range of a muskrat, considered a furbearer and targeted by trappers when fur prices dictate, rarely exceeds 400 yards

square. In areas where populations are high, fighting often ensues. Dispersal to new areas is done mostly by the young and often takes place in spring and fall. Animals are most vulnerable to predators during these moves as they venture over land and across waterways.

The muskrat measures 32-36 inches, 10 inches of which is tail. The animal has a broad head, small eyes and ears, which are nearly hidden by fur. Its legs are short and stout, with the hind feet larger than the front feet. The hind feet are partially webbed to aid in swimming.

The muskrat can do cool things like stay submerged while swimming under ice for up to 15 minutes and even swim backward. It was unceremoniously named for the musky odor given off by males and females during the breeding season.

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